

Postmodernism has  
been described as  
"illusion-breaking" art



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The phrase "illusion-breaking" could be taken in a number of ways, in this essay it is understood as a way of saying that the barriers of illusion are being stretched and tested. In the same way someone can achieve a record breaking result, a postmodernist can achieve an illusion-breaking novel by exposing illusion and taking it to a new height; by doing with it something never done before; by finding new ways to present the illusion and even hide it from the reader. To put it another way, to break illusion is to make an illusion; the words "illusion-breaking" are linked with a hyphen because that is the only way illusion can work.

For an illusion to happen it must break all the rules of reality and when that link is present the performance moves from being reality, to illusion. Illusion means something that is deceptive in appearance or belief. The word "deceptive" used here is the most important because, it does not mean that we necessarily believe the illusion presented to us (or that we are even supposed to believe in it) it means that we have been misled and because of that we are not sure whether to be sceptical of the illusion or let ourselves believe it despite the truth of reality.

To mislead somebody is to give them the wrong impression; to encourage them to follow the incorrect route, and so for the illusion to work within the text it is very important that the author only misleads and never over-informs the reader. The point at which the reader is over-informed is the point at which they begin to realise the truth behind the illusion; if this was to happen the illusion is broken and reality again takes over.

This idea of the reader not knowing if to believe the illusion or not, and how far we are prepared to ignore reality and scepticism so that we can be amazed by the illusion in front of us, is one which is heavily relied on in *Nights at the Circus*. In the same way, fiction relies on exactly that, our ability to believe what we know not to be true. We can trick ourselves for the benefit of the story (or performance, as with *Fevvers*), and when we do is when we lose our reason, so that we no longer know whether to believe what we are reading or not, it is only then that the illusionist has done their job.

*Nights at the Circus* takes as its subject the hypnotic power of narrative," (Finney) and so can make the reader believe in the illusion set out in front of them. " We are plunged straight into the narration of a very unusual narrator whose peculiar combination of Cockney English and classical erudition suggests her status as half human and half mythical - precisely the status of narrative itself. " (Finney). We do not know if to believe *Fevvers*' story or not, was she really "'Hatched out of a bloody great egg... [? ]'". (7) *Fevvers* and the narrative go hand in hand throughout the text, this must be so for the illusion to work.

The one could not exist without the other; it is *Fevvers*' performance on the stage that is the point in question; but the narrative of her story and her whole act off stage, along with the narrative used by Carter, are actually what makes her performance work. While on the other hand without *Fevvers*' act being first hand, without Walser confirming everything he sees, without the belief that she can fly (her wings being real or not) the narrative would

not be enough to make the illusion believable and so the illusion would no longer be present.

The reason for this is because you cannot produce an illusion without producing an act to go with it, in Fevvers' case her illusion is so extraordinary that her life has to follow her act in order to keep the crowds guessing. Her act is her life, and her life the act; but where do the two meet, where is the boundary line? It is intentional that we realise Fevvers is an act, but Carter never over-informs us, we are only made aware of the fact that part of her is an act; which part is left for us to think about.

Fevvers changes as the text goes on, her cockney accent for example, which is so obvious in London, seems to waver as she moves around the world.

This still does not give us any idea which of her two sides is the act, does she fake the accent for the act or is she really a cockney and learns to coax herself out of it? What this change does show however, is that there is an act within her. The structure of the novel is deliberately set out to, not emphasise, but reveal this act to us. At the very start of the book Walser is as sceptical about Fevvers as we are, "... she jumped.

Yes, jumped. ... jumped up some thirty feet in a single, heavy bound... The invisible wire that must have hauled her up remained invisible. " (16). Our thoughts are mirrored by Walser's, we know that a woman cannot possibly have wings, yet as the book and the characters travel our original certainty on the matter begins to weaken; perhaps she does have wings. We find ourselves thrown straight into the argument, for the first chapter or two both

the reader and Walser are as sceptical as each other, but as Fevvers' narration begins to take over we are slowly lured into doubt.

We know her whole life is a performance and it has to be in order to keep the illusion alive, as Walser says "... in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman - in the implausible event that such a thing existed - have to pretend she was an artificial one? "(17). Walser recognises the fact that for illusion to work there must be doubt, it would be dangerous for us to know the truth because Fevvers would either become a fake and so nobody would care for her act; or she would become that freak of nature, that abnormality that everybody is, quite frankly, disgusted by.

It is deliberate that once the performance is over and the book read that we are still not sure what to believe. Fevvers had every opportunity to show her friends that she could fly, but she never did. The only time we know of her flying, to escape from Mr Rosencreutz, there were no eyewitnesses to confirm it. When the cable was cut by the aerialists she decided not to take flight but to hang on, surely it was the perfect time to prove herself, however, Fevvers knew the importance of never showing the truth.

With the truth comes knowledge and when a person has knowledge is when they can start to answer questions, in that event Fevvers would be nothing. Her wings give her strength as a woman; they gave her money, power and authority. They made her famous and even gave her an attractiveness that perhaps her ungainly figure and habits do not deserve. She would not be able to cope with life without her wings, and so despite Walser constantly asks us to decide, we are never able to because Fevvers never allows us to.

Fevvers has constructed who she is, and what she stands for, in the same way as the clowns have.

She does not have the use of a painted face to hide her identity like they do but her wings give her the authority she needs to construct the doubt needed. Carter knowingly uses fantasy and illusion to explore the possible, and it is the middle section of the text, " Petersburg", where she dramatises and explores this idea within the circus. Throughout the text there are many opposites; we can see it with Fevvers (human versus bird; wings versus lack of flight; oppressed versus rich; powerful yet not; she even lived in a brothel yet was still a virgin).

For the circus performers, the price of the freedom within their act, is the confinement of their life; the clowns are freed by their painted faces yet trapped within them (" I have become the face which is not mine, yet I chose it freely" 122). Buffo is all too aware of his predicament, he realises that when he chose his face he condemned himself to a life without a face: " Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not Buffo. An absence. A vacancy. "' 122.

Buffo does not know whether he is Buffo, or when creating his face he also created " another self who is not me". The post-modern idea of the multiplicity of self is played with, there are a number of opposites within most of the circus performers. We can see the effect Buffo has on a child when we look at Ivan, he is terrified of the clowns (" this child was very much afraid of the clowns... " 98) yet, at the same time in complete awe of them (" a

nervous dread with the seeds of fascination in it. " 98; "... ore and more fascinated by this invasion of glum, painted comedians. " 121).

Ivan is as confused as the rest of us, and would have become a clown himself if it were not for Walser denying him the life of freedom and confinement that goes with it. Ivan would have no doubt become an illusion if it were not for Walser; after all, the entire circus was an illusion. The circus ring was full of contradictions that when uncovered exposed their act to being exactly that - an act, not a miracle or magic but simply an act.

The clowns were never happy, despite that being the key to their act; the Strong Man was strong only on the exterior; the princess was scared to turn her back on the tigers while playing the piano, just in case the tigers decided they did not feel like dancing. The Ape-Man is always drunk and so never realised that when the apes were rehearsing the classroom scene they were in fact learning and rehearsing their escape. Then there is, of course, Fevvers, the bird-woman. It is the contradictions within the text that enable it to explore the power of narration.

Fevvers narrates her story to Walser and he then follows her to St. Petersburg, when at the end of the book Fevvers realises she managed to trick him she laughed out load saying "'To think I fooled you! '" (294), this is perhaps Carter speaking to the reader considering this is what she would have liked to be able to say to them. One of the novels " main concerns is with the potentialities and limits of the act of narration" (Finney), Carter wants to discover how easily somebody can be fooled into believing the story she has written.

The book exposes the fact that it, and everything within it, is fantasy but that is not enough for the reader to act upon; they are left with the knowledge that it is all an illusion, but, because they never know which part of it was, the illusion never fails. It is very clear that Carter deliberately uses the narrative to create an illusion, we are never told the truth behind the tale or if there was ever any truth in it, because the book itself is as much of an illusion as the act within it.

Just like Fevvers, Carter always keeps us in doubt about what is really happening, at the point in the story where the train crashes, the tigers are literally sucked into the broken mirrors (" For the tigers were all gone into the mirrors. " 205), we know that this is not possible but we are prepared to accept it as possible because of the illusion that the book is. In the same way we are prepared to accept what Fevvers says because of the illusion that she is, but acceptance is not an answer to our questions, we are still in doubt about what Fevvers really is.

The possibility that she may be a hoax is what draws her audiences, and Walser, and the reader. " (Finney), there is no illusion without doubt, and this is how the novel works, while we still doubt what happened in it and do not know what to believe then Carter has achieved what she set out to do; create an illusion using narrative. Carter "... rejected the idea that language could simply re-present external reality" (Travers, 203), when writing she did not feel the need to create a believable truth, she wanted to create a not quite believable, and confusing truth - an illusion.